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HOW THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE VIEWS THE LAND-USE ISSUE

I welcome this opportunity to exchange ideas with a group of professional conservationists.

The purpose of your Society is well stated in your charter:

"To advance the science and the art of good land use."

You subscribe to this -- and so do I.

Since you are professionals -- whether you work for government or for the private sector -- you are not locked in by political ideologies nor by any preconceived set of economic or social disciplines.

You dare to ask questions -- because that is the proper function of professionals and scientists. You dare to venture into the unexplored jungle of the land-use controversy. And land-use is controversial even though you and I and many others have long recognized the efficacy and the legitimacy of having a workable, effective and an acceptable national land use policy. But this is an area -- as you well know -- of no easy choices. When you start talking about specifics -- it is easy to get in a fight and hard to win an argument.

But controversy should not -- and must not -- deter us from our common quest to find answers to how best to use the one finite resource of mankind from which all our basic wealth is derived.

Today, the race for space is not in the skies above us but on the land where we live.

Too few people recognize this.

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Speech by Dr. M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Conservation, Research and Education, at a chapter meeting of the Soil Conservation Society of America, Washington, D.C., June 9, 1977.

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In this often bitter and sometimes mindless race for land acquisition -- both the land and people ultimately suffer.

A few unassailable and brutal facts bear this out.

Every year we see the annual removal of five million acres from potential agricultural production. At least a million of this is "prime farmland" -- and, ironically enough, this is the kind of land which is most desired by home builders and industries. In one generation we have paved over land with asphalt and concrete the equivalent to the land area of several eastern states.

And the collision course between land and the people is going to accelerate in the immediate years ahead.

The arithmetic of this is inexorable. By the year 2000 -- just 23 years from now -- we will have to build another 50 to 60 million housing units to adequately meet the demands of a burgeoning population which -- by sheer pressure alone -- will be forced to use more and more of our farmland. The move of people to countryside has long since started.

This alone, raises the question of whether or not population density should be our only criteria of quality housing. The solution -- it seems to me -- lies not in controlling the numbers of people but in the way we accommodate them. This is one of the basic elements to consider when we try to arrive at a long-range land-use policy. This long-term concept runs in direct conflict with the short-term, free-wheeling economic land development policy that now exists.

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Another basic element in land use policy is one that is of immediate and deep concern to all of us who are interested in agriculture. It is this:

How far can we as a nation go in continuing to permit the kidnapping of prime farmland for housing and industrial use without gravely endangering our capacity to meet the food needs of our people and our food commitments to the disadvantaged people of the world. How far can we go before we irrevocably upset the environmental balance -- if we haven't already done so.

The take-over of farmland for other uses plus the pressure on farmers in recent years for all-out production has resulted in the use of millions of acres of marginal farmland which require massive amounts of additional inputs, such as fertilizer, water, natural gas, chemicals, oil and electric energy - all finite resources in dwindling short supply. Further, employing marginal land for intensive food production is an open invitation to additional ravaging of the top soil by erosion. Last year, alone, the SCS estimated that more than 7 million acres in the Great Plains area were severely damaged by wind erosion. For many regions it was the second and third successive year of such land depletion. How long can we permit this?

It is most difficult to make people aware of the magnitude of this alarming problem.

First of all, as more and more people have less direct contact with land -- and certainly less contact with the needs of agriculture -- there is increasing danger that they will ignore the role of land in terms of food production and ecological balance.

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Further, the nation has been lulled by the comfortable and reassuring phenomenon of increasing crop yields during the past two decades. People little understand that this has been the result of new technologies in agriculture and has all but obscured the increasing loss of farmland to other uses.

It will not always be thus -- and this is a major challenge to your Society, to the Department of Agriculture and all who are interested in a really effective land-use policy. It is an exercise in futility to talk about formulating a long-range national food policy that will meet the demands of the year 2000 and beyond if there is not sufficient land to produce the food. It is that simple.

There are those who firmly believe that in order to achieve a coherent land-use policy we must change our concept of land from that of private property to the consideration of land as a national natural resource.

Few people are ready to accept this concept -- and probably it is impossible ever to get a majority consensus in favor of it because the ownership of land and the private use of it are considered sacred rights. This concept has its roots in a culture that is almost as old as man himself.

But it is clearly patent that we cannot much longer pursue a completely laissez faire attitude in the use of our land where the only criteria is short-term economics. A land-use policy based on economic anarchy is not the answer -- it can only lead to national disaster.

Nor is piecemeal legislation the answer -- whether that be on a county, state or Federal level.

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You can't have every local district or community setting up uncoordinated, incompatible zoning regulations and land-use policies just because they believe their area is unique and has special problems. Every area is unique and has its special problems -- but these problems must be approached within the total spectrum of an entire region. But in many parts of the country uncoordinated zoning is what the race for space is turning into.

Nor should the Federal government attempt to resolve the issue with an end-all do-all program. No one omnibus land-use Federal bill could possibly solve all our complex land-use problems. And if you tried to do it with legislation on a problem-to-problem basis -- history has proved we'd only end up with a series of contradictory laws -- mass confusion -- and perhaps the absolute and terminal loss of decision-making by local people.

I have no pat and easy answers as to what should be done.

The first step -- as I see it -- is to educate the people about the enormity of the problem and the terrible consequences that will result if we continue a policy of no-policy. People must be individually convinced of the folly of using land solely on a short-term economic basis. They must be made to realize that this one basic finite resource is not something to be plundered mindlessly for greed and convenience.

Organizations like yours are doing an effective job in this direction -- but more must be done and faster.

Then -- and only then -- can we create a national consensus that will generate the kind of support that will enable Congress to draw up broad guidelines for national land-use, with supplemental programs of technical and financial assistance incentives at local and state levels to make such a policy a living reality.

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My aim as Assistant Secretary will be to help guide our programs in conservation, research, and education in a way that has the maximum favorable effect on local decisions about prime farmlands.

To that end I have re-established the USDA Land Use Committee. I serve as its chairman, and I am asking Assistant Secretary Alex Mercure to serve as vice-chairman because land-use is so closely tied to rural development. The committee's charter will be to focus on high-priority land-use problems facing this nation -- including prime farmland. The group will be busy updating USDA's policies and policy statements and relating our activities to those of several other Departments. The group will be busy looking at an appropriate mix of tools for preserving prime farmland and other values, such as land-use controls, land acquisition, easements, tax and other financial incentives. The group will be busy studying and discussing these issues and alternatives in regional workshops this fall with USDA and other government staffs and local people.

We intend to step up the production, distribution and usefulness of the "Land Use Notes" that help USDA employees and others keep up with trends and techniques in prime farmland and other issues. We intend to strengthen our educational role, through the Extension Service and other agencies.

At the same time, I have directed the agencies under my jurisdiction to:

...Increase production of detailed soil surveys.

...Increase efforts to inventory and monitor trends in the use and treatment of prime farmlands, wetlands, and other types.

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...Help guide urban growth to preserve prime farmlands, minimize fragmentation of land holdings, provide adequate water supplies, equalize taxes, dispose of waste properly, and provide adequate public health, recreation and safety services.

...Establish land-capability criteria to help direct the flow of urbanization to land areas less well suited to crops and forests.

...Manage farm, ranch, and forest practices to minimize adverse effects on the environment.

...Encourage multiple-use management of forest lands to assure a continuous supply of forest goods and services while meeting environmental objectives.

...Give attention to the need for small watershed, flood plain, wetland, and coastal zone management programs based on comprehensive land-use planning and ecological considerations.

...Minimize the impact of surface mining on agricultural production and on rural land uses.

...Locate sites for solid waste disposal as an increasingly important land use.

...Control soil erosion and reduce sedimentation from all lands.

The future of prime farmlands, wetlands, and other values also will depend on actions by the Congress and by state and local governments. The Resources Planning Act and the National Forest Management Act have helped the Forest Service usher in a new era in resource planning and management.

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Many new bills are under consideration that would influence our success in meeting prime-land objectives. We will be responsive to the Congress and to legislatures across America in weighing the impacts and alternatives of the bills and their provisions.

As your national SCSA president, Swede Martin, said at the land-use conference in Omaha this past March, people must be able to look at all 360 degrees of the land-use circle. We must be able to display a certain aggressiveness. We must be able to bring together those who need help and those who can give help.

The time is now. There are 250 million acres of prime farmland now being cropped. In each of the eight years from 1967 and 1975 that total dropped by a million acres. Other acres were rendered less effective because of leapfrogging or isolation.

There are an additional 134 million acres of prime farmland not now being cropped. But only 24 million acres of that total could be converted to cropland with few or no problems to overcome. Other acres are in small or isolated tracts, small ownership units, or are already committed to other non-cropland uses.

There are some regional twists to the prime-farmland inventories that need some attention. For example, the Northeast region has a relatively low acreage of total prime farmland as well as low prime farmland being cropped. Yet the Northeast also has the lowest percentage of potential prime farmland that could be brought into crop production without serious environmental or economic problems. No wonder the Northeast feels a heavy pinch on its available stock of agricultural resources.

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As I pointed out earlier today, the shift of cropland from prime farmland to less desirable land not only increases the risk of environmental damage and degradation of soil and water quality but it also adds operational costs and energy requirements to maintain productivity. This conclusion is obvious from a comparison of data from the 1975 Potential Cropland Study and the 1967 Conservation Needs Inventory.

Of the Class I land, all of which can be classified as prime farmland, 63 percent was "adequately treated" to prevent soil erosion and keep the land productive. The percentage decreases to less than 30 percent of Class IIe soils and to 35 percent of Class IIIs,c,w soils. The complex conservation systems required on these and on even less well suited land classes are increasingly costly.

We have a lot of work ahead of us to help landowners reach our mutual objectives for conservation land treatment. It will call for the best in research, in practical experience, in technical data and motivational skills, and in the kind of daily outreach that USDA knows best. It will call for finding ways to keep more prime farmland in agriculture so that it can be managed at lower cost with fewer environmental hazards.

In all that work I am confident that you, the members of the Soil Conservation Society of America, can and will play a tremendous part. You can help make sure the land-use process truly reaches across agency and Departmental lines and has its greatest thrust and success at the local level.

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You can -- and I strongly encourage you to -- share ideas and involvement with other private organizations such as the National Wildlife Federation and the Wilderness Society. There is much we can all achieve together.

America's future depends on our achievement. Let us continue.

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